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THE EVOLUTION OF DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE.

BY ARCHIBALD HENDERSON.

IN the contemporary dramatic movement, nothing is more certain than the uncertainty of criticism in regard to the fundamental structure of a work of dramatic art. The iconoclasm of modern dramatic practice has been vastly unsettling in destroying old superstitions and inaugurating new heresies. English dramatic criticism in the closing half of the nineteenth century achieved notoriety, rather than notability, for its failure to recognize the great modern masters in drama for our epoch—Ibsen and Wagner. This failure arose because Ibsen and Wagner violently broke with the traditions; and, even in doing so, they set a standard of rigor and craftsmanship seldom, if ever, equalled upon the ancient stage. There is always something of the iconoclast in the genius: the iconoclast and the reformer are phases of one and the same life. It is often the case that greatness does not consist simply in doing what other people have done and doing it better: efficiency might better describe Emerson's ideal. Genius consists in doing what no one else has ever done before, and setting new standards for posterity to formulate. "The greatest artist," as Bernard Shaw says, "is he who goes a step beyond the demand, and by supplying works of a higher beauty and a higher interest than have yet been perceived, succeeds, after a brief struggle with its strangeness, in adding this fresh extension of sense to the heritage of the race."*

It is no less true of drama than of any other form of art that its laws are not abstract principles dogmatically enunciated by the greatest and most authoritative critics. On the contrary,

* "A Degenerate's View of Nordau"; *Liberty*, New York, July 27th, 1895.

these "laws" are generalizations from study and analysis of all extant works of dramatic art. True drama springs from the inner essential necessity of the dramatic artist for creative self-expression, and not from any motive, however laudable and worthy, to conform to classical traditions or to adapt one's self to current taste. Oscar Wilde was quite right in the assertion that the public is not the munificent patron of the artist, but that the artist is the munificent patron of the public. For too long, dramatic critics have been "telling a lie in a heroic couplet":

"The drama's laws the drama's patrons give;
And those who live to please must please to live."

That fresh extension of sense to the heritage of the race, of which Shaw speaks, is the contribution of neither critic nor public, but of the creative artist himself. The "laws" of the drama are the integrations of the practice of all dramatists, past and present. Every great pioneer in drama necessarily causes some modification, some recodification, of the "laws" of that art.

The way-breaker in art, it must be granted, is at once disciple and master of his age—disciple, because he must study and realize his age in order to be its interpreter and exponent; master, because he imparts to his artistic product something personal, incommunicable, inalienable—and thereby dominates the thought of his contemporaries. The evolutionary trend of all art, imaginative and realistic, renders it imperative for the dramatist to make himself conversant with—which is not at all the same thing as slavishly subservient to—the prevailing conditions of his art as practised by his fellow craftsmen. If the dramatist purports to be the brief and abstract chronometer of the time he must, of course, take account of all that has been done before him, reaping the benefit of both past progress and present innovation. "We shall find, I think," says Arthur Wing Pinero, "that the drama is not stationary but progressive. By this I do not mean that it is always improving; what I do mean is that its conditions are always changing, and that every dramatist whose ambition it is to produce live plays is absolutely bound to study carefully the conditions that hold good for his own day and generation."*

* "Robert Louis Stevenson, the Dramatist; The Critic": New York, April, 1903.

In this present day, when such practical scientists as Hugo de Vries and Luther Burbank have shown that evolution frequently proceeds, not by infinitely slow processes extending through æons of time, but by sudden and startling mutations, one need not be surprised to find verificative analogues in the domain of art and letters. Indeed, the history of the drama significantly indicates that its evolution has frequently operated through sudden mutations at periods when the drama flourished as the most potent of the forms of literary art. The history of drama is made up both of the biographies of great men and of the biographies of great movements—direct and spontaneous outbursts of creative energy. The drama has been defined as the meeting-place of life and art; and hence one need not be surprised to discover that the drama is as mutable as the conditions of the civilization which gives it birth. Aristophanes knew as little of the captain of industry as Shakespeare knew of wireless telegraphy or Molière of Darwinism. It would have been as impossible for Calderon to write a "Ghosts" or "A Waste" as it would be to-day for Bernard Shaw to say what society will be like under Socialism—should it ever come!

It is no matter for surprise, then, that plays, like people, have a way of ageing. The artist of one age is the artisan in the view of the next. The rigid conventions of one period of art culture become the threadbare conventionalities of a more advanced epoch. Customs, manners and even morals all become obsolete in the course of time. Human nature, essential virtue, alone remains the same. "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*" is an aphorism that breaks down in the drama in its structural and external aspects. The face of society and the conventions of technique are perpetually changing and remaining changed. Plays begin to "date" deplorably after a certain length of time.

"Everything has its own rate of change. Fashions change more quickly than manners, manners more quickly than morals, morals more quickly than passions, and, in general, the conscious reasonable life more quickly than the instinctive, wilful, affectionate one. The dramatist who deals with the irony and humor of the relatively durable sides of life, or with their pity and terror, is the one whose comedies and tragedies will last longest—sometimes so long as to lead a book-struck generation to dub him 'Immortal'; and proclaim him as 'not for an age, but for all time.'"—"The Second Dating of Sheridan: Dramatic Opinions and Essays." By G. Bernard Shaw, Vol. II, p. 29.

In precisely the same way the fundamental outlook of the drama, its *Ausschauung*, if I may so express it, undergoes alteration in the course of time through the influence of the evolutionary trend of human ideals. So also the *métier* of the drama may alter in character through the propulsive effect of evolutionary art ideals. The *œuvre à thèse* of a Brieux is as foreign to the age of Corneille as the democratic art of Tolstoy to the Elizabethan era. Moreover, the conventions of the drama are perpetually undergoing mutations of a more or less revolutionary character. The rules which bound Shakespeare do not impose upon Ibsen; the term "*la pièce bien faite*," once a phrase to conjure with, has now become a term virtually depreciative and condemnatory. "Nowadays an actor cannot open a letter or toss off somebody else's glass of poison," Bernard Shaw remarks, "without having to face a brutal outburst of jeering!"

In the light of modern criticism, it is quite obvious that Aristotle wrote for his own epoch, not for ours. Indeed, it is a question whether he was final in his "Poetics," even for his own epoch. In the time of Corneille, the *odium dramaticum* burned almost as fiercely as the *odium theologicum*. No dramatist was given the critical *imprimatur* who did not conform to the "three unities." The curious circumstance in connection with this practice of the French and the Italians is that, whereas they supposed they were imitating the ancients, as a matter of fact the unities of time and place were not erected into principles by the Greek tragic dramatists. In his "Poetics," Aristotle rightly insists upon the one indispensable unity—unity of action; but he actually does not lay down the preservation of the unities of time and place as fundamental laws of the drama. Unity of place is not touched upon in his "Poetics"; and his disquisitions upon unity of time are merely his observations drawn from a study of the habitual practice of the ablest dramatists who flourished up to his time. From the philosophic and ethical side the crude notion of poetic justice has given place to an infinitely more human, if less artificially symmetrical, scheme of things. Only in melodrama, in the absolute sense, does this system of graded rewards and punishments still rankly flourish.

Gustav Freytag, the great modern authority upon dramaturgics, wrote his "Technique of the Drama" nearly half a century ago. The importance of this simple statement lurks in the fact that

this one great modern standard was written before Henrik Ibsen had produced his wonderful social dramas of modern life. Hauptmann and Sudermann had not written one of their studies of modern society which, since Ibsen's death, place them at the summit of contemporary dramatic art. Wilde and Shaw, as children, were playing, care-free, in Dublin; Rostand and Hervieu were babes; while Maeterlinck and Barker were yet unborn.

The questions, technical and dramaturgic, raised by the persistent practice of dramatists since the middle of the last century, demand conscientious solution at the hands of contemporary students of the drama. New ideas have forced their way to the front; new forms of art have left their distinctive impress upon the stage; new dramatic conventions have replaced the outworn conventionalities of an earlier epoch. The pressure of realism and the impulsive thrust of the new social order have basically affected the tenor and structure of the drama. The psychology of the crowd helps us to understand more clearly the secrets of popular appeal. The architectural features of the modern play-house are not without their subtle influence in separating even more irrevocably play from public, actors from audience. Gone is the tennis-court stage of the Grand Monarque, gone the courtyard stage of Shakespeare, gone even the semicircular platform of half a century ago. To-day the illusion of objectivity is immense: we gaze through a picture-frame encircling the farce or the melodrama, the comedy or the tragedy, of this our time. When we enter that palace of light and sound, the theatre, we become innocent accessories after the fact to all that goes on before us in a room of which one wall has been removed.

It is high time—not to retrace our steps, for there can be no turning back,—but to orient ourselves and to take stock of our present status. Many arresting and disquieting problems to-day press for solution; and while Steiger, Volkeldt, Brunetière, Sarcey, Faguet, Walkley, Archer, Shaw and Matthews have written much, and ably, concerning the technique of the drama, Freytag's successor has not yet appeared to justify to the artistic, the critical and, one may even add, the scientific conscience, the most modern forms of dramatic art. It may not be amiss to indicate, quite briefly, the principal questions of technique in the contemporary drama which press for adequate treatment in terms of evolutionary and constructive criticism.

First of all, the actual subject-matter of drama has taken the color of the age in which we live; and we must not forget that all technical questions ultimately depend upon the materials with which the dramatist works. The modern era, with its levelling democracy, its social accent, its preoccupation with the affairs of the average man, its discovery of the miracle of the commonplace, has ushered into the drama an entirely new range of subjects. In the drama of the past the personages and events treated were distinctly aristocratic in nature. Nobility of character was identified—or confused?—with nobility of rank. Great events were universally associated with people of high station. In Whitman's view, Shakespeare was pre-eminently the poet of courts and princes; and Ernest Crosby made quite clear the attitude of Shakespeare toward the working-classes. To-day, that "literature of the centre" of which Matthew Arnold spoke seems to be giving way more and more to the literature of the circumference. The old notion still persists in many quarters; and we find even so stimulating a critic as Mr. W. L. Courtney saying:

"There may be tragedies in South Hampstead, although experience does not consistently testify to the fact; but, at all events, from the historic and traditional standpoint, tragedy is more likely to concern itself with Glamys Castle, Melrose Abbey, Carisbrooke, or even with Carlton House Terrace."*

The charge triumphantly urged against Ibsen by "the old guard," headed by Clement Scott, is that he is provincial, parochial, suburban; that he deals with ordinary people and everyday life; that he has definitively doffed the purple pall of tragedy. In this assertion inheres the secret of Ibsen's distinction, the note of his social dramas of modern life. As Bernard Shaw says:

"Suburbanity at present means modern civilization. The active, germinating life in the households of to-day cannot be typified by an aristocratic hero, an ingenuous heroine, a gentleman forger abetted by an Artful Dodger, and a parlor maid who takes half-sovereigns and kisses from the male visitors. Such interiors exist on the stage and nowhere else. . . . But, if you ask me where you can find the Helmer household, the Allmers household, the Solness household, the Rosmer household, and all the other Ibsen households, I reply, 'Jump out of a train anywhere between Wimbledon and Haslemere, walk into the first villa you come to, and there you are.' . . . This suburban life, except in so far as it is totally vegetable and undramatic, is the life depicted

* "The Idea of Tragedy." By W. L. Courtney, p. 122.
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by Ibsen. Doubtless some of our critics are quite sincere in thinking it a vulgar life, in considering the conversations which men hold with their wives in it improper, in finding its psychology puzzling and unfamiliar, and in forgetting that its bookshelves and its music-cabinets are laden with works which did not exist for them, and which are the daily bread of young women educated very differently from the sisters and wives of their day. No wonder they are not at ease in an atmosphere of ideas and assumptions and attitudes which seem to them bewildering, morbid, affected, extravagant and altogether incredible as the common currency of suburban life. But Ibsen knows better. His suburban drama is the inevitable outcome of a suburban civilization (meaning a civilization that appreciates fresh air); and the true explanation of Hedda Gabler's vogue is that given by Mr. Grant Allen: 'I take her in to dinner twice a week.'**

The drama typical of our day is *bourgeois* in character, dealing with the thoughts and passions, the loves and hates, the comedies and tragedies, of the sort of people we meet every day on the street. They are people with like passions as ourselves, and the incidents of their lives are constantly being reproduced around us in real life. The influence of the first truly realistic novels, dealing with the affairs of people quite commonplace in every respect, save that of human interest or moral passion, was gradually felt in the sphere of the drama.† The pedestrian realism and middle-class preoccupations of Richardson, of Fielding, of Rousseau set up a movement in fiction which first met acceptance in the drama at the hands of Diderot, and found further and higher development through the instrumentality of Dumas *fils*, Augier, Ibsen, Bjørnsen and the modern school of playwrights. The anecdotes and adventures which constitute the material of the earlier drama have lost their hold upon the modern world because they no longer furnish us that thrill of immediate actuality, that vital interest of contemporaneous circumstance, which live only in the atmosphere of to-day. As Maeterlinck says:

"Consider the drama that actually stands for the reality of our time, as Greek drama stood for Greek reality, and the drama of the Renaissance for the reality of the Renaissance. Its scene is a modern house; it passes between men and women of to-day. The names of the invisible protagonists—the passions and ideas—are the same, more or less, as of old. We see love, hatred, ambition, jealousy, envy, greed; the sense

* "Little Eyolf: Dramatic Opinions and Essays." By G. Bernard Shaw, Vol. II, pp. 106-107.

† Compare "Modern Social Drama as Influenced by the Novel." By W. L. Courtney, "The Eclectic Magazine," Third Series, Vol. VIII.

of justice and idea of duty; pity, goodness, devotion, piety, selfishness, vanity, pride, etc. But, although the names have remained more or less the same, how great is the difference we find in the aspect and quality, the extent and influence, of these ideal actors! Of all their ancient weapons not one is left them, not one of the marvellous moments of olden days. It is seldom that cries are heard now; bloodshed is rare, and tears not often seen. It is in a small room, round a table, close to the fire, that the joys and sorrows of mankind are decided. We suffer or make others suffer; we love, we die, there in our corner; and it were the strangest chance should a door or a window suddenly, for an instant, fly open beneath the pressure of extraordinary despair or rejoicing.”*

The natural corollary to the suburbanization of the drama is the degeneration of the hero. Instead of the hero of the past conquering every foe, we have to-day the hero *manqué*, struggling with fatal futility against the overwhelming pressure of environment, the brand of heredity, the coil of circumstance, the chains of character, the damning verdict of self-mockery and self-contempt. According to the critical canons of the past, the hero must be a person of consideration, of distinction—“an ideal character in an ideal situation,” to use the ridiculous phrase. The solution already to hand was to make the hero a person of exalted rank. This was the doctrine of at least two centuries of criticism—the doctrine of Corneille, of D’Aubignac, of Racine, of Voltaire, of Dacier, of Sir Philip Sydney. It is as important as ever that the protagonist should be distinctive, in some way set apart from the common herd, whether through surplus of human feeling, magnanimity of soul, profundity of passion or breadth of social instinct. But to-day the protagonist, in both novel and drama, has stepped down from the pedestal of the colossal; he has now “lost the last gleam from the sunset of the heroes.” As Mr. Gilbert Chesterton has pointed out:

“Down to the time of Dickens, we have the first walking gentleman, the young man carrying with him a certain ancestral light and atmosphere of legend. And, about the time of Dickens’s later work, that light fades into the light of common day. The first great creation of the new manner in England is the character of Arthur Pendennis. This is the young man lit from head to foot suddenly with the white light of realism, all the red lamps of legend being extinguished around him.”† So also in the drama, the leading male character—it would be profoundly absurd to dignify him with the title of “hero”—is

* “The Modern Drama”: The Double Garden, by Maurice Maeterlinck, pp. 122–123.

† “The Young Man in Fiction”; “The Critic,” August, 1903.

often little elevated above the level of the commonplace, and in many cases little more or less than a fraud, an impostor, a bounder or a cad. The moral predisposition of the dramatist often makes the protagonist a ridiculous, a pitiable or even a sinister figure, satirizing himself by outraging the conscience of the spectators every time he does his "duty." In a sense, Hamlet is a foreshadowing of the protagonist of ultra-modern drama; and in another generation, perhaps, dissatisfaction with conventional morality, tempered by improvement in ethical standards, will give place to individual moral dignity in the domain of the heroic. Stockmann swings too far away from Helmer, Marchbanks from Morell, Tanner from Ramsden; the contrasts are, psychologically, almost grotesque. Obsessed by polemical intent and reformatory zeal, the modern dramatist, from Ibsen to Shaw, has charged his product with mordant comic and tragic irony. The protagonist has lost his poise in the violence of his reaction; we either see him as a violent reactionary and headlong reformer, or observe him from the modern woman's point of view, catching "glimpse after glimpse of himself from this point of view himself, as all men are beginning to do more or less now, the result, of course, being the most horrible dubiety on his part as to whether he is really a brave and chivalrous gentleman or a humbug and a moral coward."

The hope for the hero of the drama of the future lies in the domain of moral psychology. In speaking of the protagonist of contemporary drama, Mr. W. L. Courtney has said:

"Instead of being a nobleman, or at least distinguished, he has become merely *bourgeois*; instead of knowing that whatever he suffers is accurately proportioned to his guilt, and that he is the victim of true poetic justice, he has become lost in mazes of indiscriminate action, succeeding and failing, he knows not why, subject to the most marvellous coincidences, 'a foiled, circuitous wanderer' in an unreasonable world."*

The modern "hero" is a failure, because he is frustrated on every hand by the savage irony of facts—the insufficiency of his moral code, the mockery of his introspection, the discrepancy between deductions and facts, the evils of contemporary society, the lethargy of civic conscience, the irresistible pressure of the social organism. Perhaps this bankruptcy of masculine heroism

* "Vicissitudes of the Hero in Drama"; "Eclectic Magazine," Third Series, Vol. VIII, p. 208.

may help to explain the fact that the truly heroic rôles in modern drama are played by women. With Mr. Chesterton, we may well look forward to that future work of genius which shall give us "a psychological Hercules," and "show us that there is potentially a rejection for every temptation, a mastery for every mischance, much as there is a parry for every stroke of the sword."

Not only is the hero shorn of his ancient attributes in modern drama; he is actually robbed of all the accessories which once went so far toward creating the illusion. The hero of romance accomplished miracles, performing unheard-of deeds of skill and daring; and he always spoke in the language befitting his station and his achievements. The protagonist of the modern drama is taken alive from the midst of modern life; his actions and his modes of expression are typical of this unromantic and unheroic age in which we live. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that Carlyle and Mommsen understood the ancient hero as typified in Julius Cæsar better than did either Plutarch or Shakespeare. As Mr. Forbes-Robertson asks, "Why should the hero of classical antiquity always be thought of as strutting around with arm extended, indulging in bombastic rant and spouting a lot of blank verse?" The modern drama is marked by that creeping paralysis of external action of which Maurice Maeterlinck speaks; the interpreter of contemporary life has discovered that a motive is as thrilling a dramatic theme as an action; and that passion is as vital in its repression as in its exhibition. The difference between the modern realists and the old epic poets, it has been pointed out, is the whole difference "between an age that fought with dragons and an age that fights with microbes." In this microbe-fighting age the protagonist is profoundly concerned with the importance of the trivial; and his language—often even his thought—barely suffices to elevate him above the mean level of the commonplace. The case for the modern dramatic realist is best put in that remarkable letter of Ibsen to Edmund Gosse, January 15th, 1874:

"You are of the opinion that the drama ought to have been written in verse, and that it would have gained by this. Here I must differ from you. The play is, as you must have observed, conceived in the most realistic style; the illusion I wished to produce was that of reality. I wished to produce the impression on the reader that what he was reading was something that had really happened. If I had employed verse,

I should have counteracted my own intention and prevented the accomplishment of the task I had set myself. The many ordinary, insignificant characters whom I have intentionally introduced into the play would have been indistinct and indistinguishable from one another, if I had allowed them to speak in one and the same rhythmical measure. We are no longer living in the days of Shakespeare. Among sculptors there the representation. My new drama is no tragedy in the ancient acceptation; what I desired to depict were human beings, and therefore I would not let them talk the 'language of the Gods.'”*

In Henrik Ibsen, among contemporary dramatists, the evolutionary trend of technical process is most vividly defined. Discarding verse as the inevitable medium of modern thought, Ibsen sought to hammer the prose of our day into a weapon of the finest temper and highest efficiency. No one better than Ibsen himself realized how many innovations had to be made, how many obstacles overcome, how many conventions discarded. Steadily forging towards naturalness, ease, verisimilitude, Ibsen rejected with the utmost firmness approved classic models on the ground that they did not contribute towards the aims he had in view. Indeed, it was inevitable, once realism had gained a firm footing, that many of the artificial conventions of the past should ultimately be rejected by a generation which made naturalness the watchword and slogan of its art.

The drama, it need scarcely be remarked, involves nothing more nor less than a series of tacit agreements between actors and audience. The most objective, the most impersonal, of the arts by reason of its limiting conditions, the drama is, nevertheless, that is already talk of painting statues in the natural colors. I have no desire to see the Venus of Milo painted, but I would rather see the head of a negro executed in black than in white marble. Speaking generally, the style must conform to the degree of ideality which pervades fact, positively ignored; the illusion of reality is precluded by refusal to fall in with this necessarily mutual compact. This tacit conspiracy, if originally carried out in the proper spirit, becomes in course of time a totally unconscious process in the mind of the spectator. The moment one enters a theatre he be-
form of art which involves the greatest number of implied contracts. There is a tacit agreement between player and spectator comes a willing believer in the artificial operations of a mimic that certain flagrant breaches of veracity are to be winked at—in

* "Letters of Henrik Ibsen," edited by J. N. Laurvik, p. 269.

world, ruled by many laws and governed by many conventions, which do not obtain in the world of actuality. In making a bust of either Booker or George Washington, the sculptor feels free to use either white marble or bronze at his pleasure. The Wagnerian opera is written and composed about a race of beings whose only mode of vocal communication is that of song. Dramas in which all the characters speak in verse are, of course, from the realistic standpoint, manifest absurdities. Realism has its skilfully concealed conventions also; no race of people ever spoke as do the characters of Shaw and Ibsen—brilliant epigram, cogent argument, irrepressible dialectic, on the one hand, or perfection of condensation, appositeness and brevity, on the other.

Conventions which to a former age seemed indispensable to the stage and to the drama impress our generation as mere fashion. In his earlier plays, for example, Ibsen made use of a great many conventions, which his incorruptible sense of veracity led him to reject when he began to depict the life of his own age. Certain of these earlier plays are quite Scribelike in their artificiality; but his very first play in prose, "The League of Youth," although a "well-made piece," *par excellence*, after the Scribe formula, is a decisive step toward greater naturalness. To use Ibsen's own expression, its language gives it "strong, realistic coloring," and the whole play is carried through "without a single monologue—in fact, without a single aside." In this remark, I believe, Ibsen sounded the death-knell of the monologue, the soliloquy, the aside; and by his practice soon rendered ridiculous those dramatists who persisted in employing these devices.

Let us consider for a moment these curious survivals of a more formal, a more artificial, stage of the drama. To-day nothing shocks a sensitive critic—or, indeed, a self-respecting audience—more than to have to endure a play which opens by the descent of two persons to the footlights to carry on an expository conversation beginning, "It is now twenty-five years since, etc." I can still summon the feeling of profound disgust with which, as a boy of eight years of age, I witnessed the opening act of a dramatization of Rider Haggard's "She": two men sitting on a log for half an hour and telling half the story of the novel to put the audience *en rapport* with the situation! Equally unendurable to a modern audience is the device of the soliloquy or the monologue, serving as a sort of first aid to ignorant audiences.

From time immemorial, the soliloquy has been a favorite device of dramatists for putting the audience in close and immediate touch with the matter in hand; and it is a device which was once much relished by the auditor. In his "*Pratique du Théâtre*" the Abbé d'Aubignac confesses "that it is sometimes very pleasant to see a man upon the stage lay open his heart and speak boldly of his most secret thoughts, explain his designs and give a vent to all that his passion suggests." Examples of this means of self-revelation and self-betrayal are notable in the history of the drama: the "To be or not to be" of Hamlet, the self-condemnatory confessions of Iago, Wallenstein's mystic presages of impending disaster, Orgon's grotesque imaging of the deformities of his own soul, Brand's heart-cries of poignant passion. But it must be observed that the soliloquy has been used in the drama for two purposes: either to exhibit the soul-state of an harassed mortal under the stress of tremendous feeling, or else for the reprehensible end of acquainting the audience with certain facts indispensable to their comprehension of the plot. As a matter of fact, people sometimes—and not infrequently—do give audible expression to their thoughts and feelings when they are, or fancy themselves, alone. But the soliloquy of a sane man in actual life is of an exceedingly brief interval of time—a few words or, at most, a few sentences. The soliloquy in its crude form is discarded by the modern dramatist because it is an artificial device, scarcely having the justification of Queen Elizabeth's definition of a lie: "an intellectual means of avoiding a difficulty."

Dramatic craftsmanship has to-day reached a point of such complex excellence that the best dramatists refuse to employ so unworthy a device as the lengthy soliloquy: first, because it is fundamentally untrue to actual life; second, because it seeks to give information which may be more veraciously imparted in more natural ways. As Professor Matthews has pointed out, the soliloquy was more acceptable in the days of the "platform stage, with the characters ever in close contact with the spectators; but it is far less suitable for the playwright who works for the picture stage, whereon the characters are too far removed to be justified in making confidential communications to the audience."* And yet attention should be called to the fact that in the forthright

* "Concerning the Soliloquy," by Brander Matthews; Putnam's Monthly, November, 1906.

dramas of to-day—from the farces of W. S. Gilbert and the comedies of Shaw to the tragi-comedies of Wedekind and the serious dramas of Ibsen—the characters speak out in the presence of their acquaintances with such astounding frankness, such boundless naïveté, that the harboring of secret thoughts seems almost to have disappeared in the economy of contemporary civilization. The soliloquy, save of very brief length and in exceptional cases, is no longer needed—especially by the advanced type of individual who prefers to tell everybody everything!

Allied to the device of the soliloquy is that of the confidant, who for long has been wont to share the secrets of the protagonist. Instead of speaking solely to himself—or to the audience if the illusion be shattered—the protagonist in this case confides his woes to a sympathetic listener. Frequently the confidant not only draws out the protagonist, but also grows quite communicative “off his own bat,” thus materially furthering the action of the piece. By means of the confidant, as well as by means of the soliloquy, the audience is informed of many facts needful for a comprehension of the situation. As Sardou has confessed, the dramatist often finds himself controlled by the conditions of the situation which he projects; his only mode of escape is to have part of the plot, certain intervening links in the story, inserted through the intermediaries of confidences and personal confessions. The undisguised confidant, in the crudest form, is banished from the modern stage, because it is a spurious and often-times unnatural means of furthering the action of the piece. But it is quite unreasonable to suppose that the confidant, naturally presented, will ever disappear from the stage. The confidential friend is frequently portrayed by the rigorous craftsman, Ibsen—Mrs. Linden in “A Doll’s House,” Mrs. Elvsted in “Hedda Gabler,” Dr. Herdal in “The Master Builder,” and so on. Bernard Shaw, who has vigorously protested against “recklessness in the substitution of dead machinery and lay figures for vital action and real characters,” employs the confidant, more or less thinly disguised, in several of his plays—Praed in “Mrs. Warren’s Profession,” McComas in “You Never Can Tell,” Cokane in “Widowers’ Houses.” The rôle of confidential friend is a natural rôle played by almost every one every day of his life. Thousands of men and women in the world are peculiarly fitted by nature to play the part of confidant, and do actually go through

life playing practically nothing else.* The confidential friend will continue to play his part on the stage, so long as he is naturally presented, so long as his presence is integral and vital to the psychological processes of the action.

In notable modern dramas the rôles of *raisonneur*, of ideal spectator, of modernized, individualized Greek chorus, frequently appear. In the plays of Dumas fils the *raisonneur* plays a conspicuous part; in Ibsen we find this rôle played by Dr. Relling in "The Wild Duck," for example; in Sudermann's "*Die Ehre*," Count Trast at times seems little more than an exposition of the author's meaning of the title. In Pinero's "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray," Cayley Drummle is a composite of confidant and individualized Greek chorus; while in Shaw's "John Bull's Other Island," Keegan is the ideal spectator pure and simple. In the majority of Shaw's plays some character seems to stand out as the expositor and interpreter of the author's views. These characteristic examples are cited to illustrate the fact that dramatic art has not yet learned to dispense with some variant form of the ideal spectator, call it by whatsoever name you will. The *raisonneur*, though modern in appearance, in reality is merely a survival of an ancient convention. It appears to be one of those conventions, almost structurally inherent in technical chirography, by which the dramatist meets the audience half-way in the task of interpretation. The *raisonneur* survives to-day, less as replica of contemporary humanity, than as symbol of the dramatist's personal struggle to obviate the extreme objectivity of drama. In an age of persistent propagandism the *raisonneur* typifies the polemical passion of modern thought.

The "stage aside," an even cruder form of technical device than either the soliloquy or the confidant, is now forever relegated to the limbo of threadbare stage properties. It is a sort of petty and bastard form of the soliloquy, serving either the serious purpose of discovering the intent of the character, or the comic purpose of betraying his naïveté or sense of humor. The "stage whisper" is as universal a mark for derision as the mother-in-law joke or the Burgessic "bromide"—and for no other reason than that it is absurdly unnatural, serving merely as a sort of "dead give away"—usually for comic effect. The "stage aside"

* In this connection compare "A Talk on Technique," by William Archer; The Tribune (London), May 18th, 1907.

survives in the musical comedy, the farce, the melodrama and even in light operas such as those of Gilbert and Sullivan. But, like the soliloquy, the "stage aside" is condemned by the modern realist, who makes his characters utter aloud the daring iconoclasm, the mordant ironies, the solemn profundities which they would once have uttered *sotto voce*.

The lengthy soliloquy, the undisguised confidant and the stage aside have virtually been eliminated from the category of legitimate dramatic technique. Ibsen, the greatest technician of all, rejecting theatrical artifices and questionable conventions, achieved the most severely realistic transcripts of life by projecting situations, not as *manipulations*, but as *creations* of character—the inevitable events of an attitude towards life, a point of view, an *état d'âme*. With that peculiar and remarkable retrospective method of his invention, whereby Ibsen causes his plays to turn upon events supposed to have happened before the rise of the curtain, characters are developed in conflict, pitfalls discovered, motives unveiled and soul histories disclosed. And this achievement is effected without the employment of fraudulent devices by which earlier and less expert craftsmen endeavored to unroll the story. As Georg Brandes recently wrote:

"The most esteemed dramatists before him, such as Frederick Hebbel, came to be looked upon as his mere forerunners. The French dramatists, who in his youth were masters in the European theatres, became antiquated in presence of his art. With them there is still an intrigue in an antiquated form. Some one is made to believe something and reacts. Since the artificial intrigue in Ibsen's youthful play, 'Lady Inger,' such plots never more occur with him. From within, the characters are disclosed. A veil is lifted, and we notice the peculiar stamp of the personality. A second veil is lifted, and we learn its past. A third veil is lifted, and we catch a glimpse of its profoundest nature."

The great achievement of the modern dramatist, one might even say his great innovation, has been the identification of the *action* and the *exposition*. Hebbel, that profound student of dramatic art, recognized in the separation of the exposition and the action the principal barrier between art and life. In the works of the greatest modern dramatists the drama is an organic unit. No word is addressed directly to the public—"Peter Pan" to the contrary notwithstanding!—and the actors are definitely cut off from the audience by the insurmountable barrier of the picture-frame stage.

In fine, the drama of to-day, through the influences of modern democracy, of shifting moral values, of the critical rather than the worshipful attitude towards life, of an irresistible thrust towards increased naturalness and greater veracity, has become *bourgeois*, dealing with the world of *tous les jours*; comic, verging upon the tearful, or serious, trenching upon the tragic; unheroic, suburban and almost prosaic, yet vastly interesting by reason of its sincerity and its humanity; essentially critical in tone, proving all things, holding fast that which is good. The contemporary realist rejects the stage tricks which discredit the able craftsman—the lengthy soliloquy, the undisguised confidant, the stage aside; but still finds it unnecessary to dispense with the brief monologue, the confidential friend and the *raisonneur*. The symbolic phrase and the repetitive symbol are new and reputable variants of the mechanical catchword and the farcical “gag.” Unity of action, alone of the three unities, is the indispensable unity; and there is no abstract or ideal justice to replace the poetic justice of a more mechanical epoch in art. Action and exposition are identical; and the modern drama concerns itself less with material action than with a minute and exhaustive consideration of the motives which prompt to action. If symbolism upon the one hand tends to cloud the scene, ample elucidative stage descriptions and directions tend vastly to clarify the intent of the author and the *rationale* of the piece. The influence of the picture-frame stage, making for increased objectivity, is offset by the continued recurrence of the personal equation. Rarer and rarer are becoming the “necessarily artificial poems that arise from the impossible marriage of past and present”; and in the future, reconstitution of past epochs, revitalization of historic episodes and characters, promise to be effected solely through the transmutative media of modern philosophy and contemporary thought. The humanizing influences of fraternal sympathy, of social pity and social justice are beginning to replace, in some measure, more personal and selfish interests. “There still remains in the depths of every heart of loyal intention,” as Maeterlinck finely says, “a great duty of charity and justice that eclipses all others. And it is perhaps from the struggle of this duty against our egoism and ignorance that the veritable drama of our century shall spring.”

ARCHIBALD HENDERSON.